

the *Record*.⁴⁰ The northern part of the city exploded with violent outbreaks at multiple intersections and landmarks during the day. The exact timeline of events remains unclear.

Standoff at Sprunt's Cotton Compress

One of the areas where panic and fear ignited tensions was the Sprunt Cotton Compress on Front Street between Walnut and Red Cross Streets. James Sprunt, among the city's wealthiest white men and a member of the chamber of commerce, employed hundreds of black workers who worked as stevedores loading cotton onto ships, as laborers at the large compress, and as equipment operators to process the cotton. The men working at the compress were unaware of the activity on the other side of town until the fire bell rang. Workers' wives fled to the compress to tell their husbands about the *Record* burning and that whites were burning their homes and firing weapons throughout the city.⁴¹ In short order, several hundred workers gathered in a state of confusion outside the compress, and work stopped in the compress as laborers left their posts. The unarmed workers were "in a state of bewilderment, wondering what had happened, and what might eventuate."⁴² The workers told Sprunt that they were "hard working ... and that the whites ought not to stir them up and terrorize them."⁴³ In attempts to protect his workers, Sprunt tried to get them to stay on his property and away from town in hopes

that they would not be involved in violence.⁴⁴

Sprunt was joined by Junius Davis, George Rountree, and Roger Moore in his attempts to calm the workers and prevent them from going to their homes. At the same time, however, after hearing a rumor of the gathering of workers at Sprunt's business, a large number of whites entered the area with guns on their shoulders, ready to keep the "mob" of frightened blacks under control. Some of the whites approached Moore and told him that "if he did not give the order to shoot into the negroes on the opposite corner," the mob would do so anyway. Moore responded that he had been placed in "command" by his fellow citizens, and until he was removed from command, he would not allow bloodshed and would have the instigators arrested. The men complied and took their place in the ranks.⁴⁵

Captain Donald MacRae, recently returned to Wilmington from the Spanish-American War, recalled that while he watched a crowd going in the direction of the compress, someone told him to go home and get his gun. MacRae returned to the street loaded with a "riot gun and about seventy five pounds of riot cartridges and two pistols and a bowie knife or two" and headed for a crowd gathered near Sprunt's compress. While in the crowd watching Sprunt attempt to calm his employees, MacRae was recognized as a soldier and was asked to lead the crowd, who wanted to "kill the whole gang of negroes."⁴⁶ MacRae was asked to be their leader because he had just been through the war and knew "about what should be done." MacRae recalled that he "had very little stomach for it and as very

⁴⁰ The white men who have been identified as the first to exchange gunfire with blacks in the Brooklyn neighborhood were also residents of the area.

⁴¹ Rountree, *Memoirs*, 14, Henry G. Connor Papers; "Story of the Wilmington Riot, A Pure Bred Negro Relates It," *Charlotte Daily Observer*, May 24, 1905.

⁴² James Cowan, "The Wilmington Race Riot."

⁴³ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 709.

⁴⁴ "Story of the Wilmington Riot," *Charlotte Daily Observer*, May 24, 1905.

⁴⁵ James Cowan, "The Wilmington Race Riot"

⁴⁶ "Minutes of the Association of the WLI," North Carolina Collection.